

Sixteen going on Twelve

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In Go there are no take-backs or do-overs. But when 16-year-old Hikaru inexplicably wakes up in his 12-year-old body with a board wiped clean and stones in hand, he's determined not to waste his second chance with Sai; even if it does mean cheating outrageously. Shindou Hikaru is sixteen going on twelve.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2011-04-14

Updated: 2012-01-14

Words: 13603

Chapters: 5

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Friendship -
Characters: Hikaru S., Fujiwara no Sai - Reviews: 196 - Favs: 877 -
Follows: 1,128

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6903507/1/Sixteen-going-on-Twelve>

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Sixteen going on Twelve

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Chapter 1

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Sixteen going on Twelve

Half a moku.

All that separated Hikaru from Ko Yeong-ha was half a moku.

It might as well be a *hundred* .

After grandstanding; *begging* Kurata to move him to first seat, Hikaru had been unable to defend Sai's Go- *Shusaku's* Go. That final stone announced not just the end of the game; but proved that his Go, shown in front of an audience come to see the pride of Japanese youth in action, just wasn't strong enough.

He had accomplished nothing; defended nothing; *proved* nothing.

Hikaru curled around his pillow, squeezing it with all his might as he fought back bitter tears. *If Sai was still here HE would have won. If Sai was here Ko Yeong-ha would never have gotten away with bad-mouthing Shusaku. Sai would have been furious! Outraged! There's no way he would have let that jerk get away with-*

Hikaru flopped backwards onto his bed, eyes covered by the crook of his elbow, and laughed despairingly. *I thought I was done missing Sai. Apparently not.* His thoughts still inevitably turned towards his

missing companion: that Sai-shaped hole carved into the back of his consciousness; that piece of himself that wasn't himself but just as good as.

The MC in the closing awards ceremony had made everyone feel good about themselves. They spoke of Japanese courage, Korean aggression, and Chinese skill. Even the press only had nice things to say about his own failure to win on the first board. They muttered words like 'potential' and 'good signs', and showed him nothing but kind smiles. But Hikaru could still hear what they left unsaid; accusing thoughts flickered in the depths of their heavy gazes. *Japan was last. Toya Akira was the only Japanese player to win. You may have played well, but you still lost.*

When Kurata finally allowed them to leave, Hikaru had done so feeling wrung-out and empty. He felt Sai's absence keenly every second of the train ride home; his own words bringing only the emptiest sort of comfort. "*I play Go to connect the past with the future.*" A half-truth. He played Go because it was the only thing that connected him to Sai.

When he arrived home there had been gruff congratulations from his grandfather, who actually understood; confused but relieved words from his mother and father, who hadn't a clue but meant well nevertheless. In no real mood to listen, he begged off using his exhaustion as an excuse to barricade himself inside his room and mope.

His life enshrined events he regretted or wished he had done differently: his treatment of Sai being the most prominent. Hikaru had resented Sai for wanting to play Go; scolded Sai when he wanted *others* to take notice of his existence; became irritated beyond measure with every unreasonable (as he saw it) request Sai had made until it was no *wonder* Sai had disappeared. Hikaru had all but decided to never let Sai play again, arrogantly confident that the ghost could just... latch onto some other poor victim after Hikaru died. But then Sai vanished. Sai disappeared and it was only *then* that he realized how much the Heian ghost had meant to him; how

much he *relied* on that voice inside his head for company, comfort, and advice. Hikaru had wrung every drop of kindness Sai had offered until the poor ghost had nothing left. Until... until he had just faded quietly away one night without even a proper goodbye.

Was he cursing my name as he left? Hikaru found himself wondering. They hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms. It was yet another regret he could never atone for; another regret only made clear in retrospect.

His selfishness cheated Akira out of a rival; forced Touya-Meijin into retirement then left him longing for the rematch that would *never* happen. He strung Ogata along just so his own life wouldn't be *inconvenienced*. He helped create the mythical online God of Go, and then left *the entire world* hanging - users online *still* maintained sites devoted to Sai's kifu, holding vain hopes of the mysterious online persona's reappearance.

All those unfulfilled hopes-the blame-could all be laid at Hikaru's feet; because he couldn't be bothered to take responsibility for bearing the burden of Sai's talent-Sai's Go.

I should have worked something out. Something so we both could have played.

How hard could it have been?

Hard. Very hard. Of course it was! he thought hysterically. He had taken on the burden too young to understand all the implications of his actions. He had been too young to work things out with the logic, patience, or maturity they required. In the frantic rush to chase Akira... he'd forgotten all about his irreplaceable interloper.

I called him selfish, Hikaru thought, and maybe he was. But so was I. We were both selfish, immature, caught up in our own problems, unwilling to compromise... Hikaru would have to live with that particular knowledge for the rest of his life.

In Go, there were no take-backs or do-overs. Just ask Isumi.

Shadows lengthened and thickened as night fell. Downstairs was quiet: Grandpa had finally taken his leave after a rowdy dinner. The goban, set in the middle of his floor and cast in the dim rays of the full moon, still displayed one of Ko Yeong-ha's games that Hikaru had been replaying before he had left for the Hokuto Cup finals, courtesy of Amano-san.

Amano-san was probably disappointed he couldn't write something more positive about our final matches, Hikaru mused gloomily. Another debt. Another disappointment.

Hikaru let out a long, frustrated breath of air held too long inside his lungs. He levered himself off the bed and plunked himself down in front of the goban. After a moment of study, he began clearing the stones. When the glass stones were back in their respective containers, he started placing them once more onto the goban.

Ten... twenty... thirty stones, and the game began to take shape. Hikaru remembered every game with his infallible memory, but this one would ever remain his most precious possession. Sai's last gift to the world of Go: a masterful game against Touya Kouyou.

Sai had taken an early lead with a clever hand, but Touya-san had come right back... *here!* Hikaru slapped a stone down, causing Sai's first hand to lose its purpose, nullifying his advantage and dooming his largest group to a futile struggle for survival. No matter how many times he replayed the game, the thrill of playing that hand remained undiminished.

Touya Kouyou had played Sai masterfully.

Of course, Sai helped. He played right into that trap. And speaking from his own efforts to use traps against Sai, Hikaru knew *exactly* how hard it was to pull the wool over the ghost's eyes. Sai's board-reading skills bordered on precognitive (or so it seemed, at times). To a normal Go-pro, this type of play would have been incredibly

demoralizing. But to Sai, it was only the impetus that drove him to raise his game to an even higher plane. His stones reformed and dashed themselves against enemy formations: a swelling and endless tide that slowly wore away at Touya-sensei's lead. Until...

Pa-chi.

This move: the crux - the linchpin, quoin, cornerstone, w *hatever you want to call it* - of the entire match. Two paths: one, the traditional approach inside, had led Sai to victory. The other: the unorthodox, the circuitous outside path would have delivered Touya Kouyou from Sai's relentless pursuit. Only Hikaru had conceptualized the importance of that single stone - only *he* had seen both paths.

If that isn't a Divine-Hand, then there's no such thing. It was the hand that decided the outcome of the match; the hand where *he* had risen above the two fierce opponents clashing upon the goban, watching from some inestimable height... if only for a moment.

Hikaru fumbled to remove that stone from the board, fingers clumsy no thanks to fresh tears blurring his sight. It was silly, he knew, to resent *this* game and *that* move. Their problems had begun far before Sai played Touya Kouyou. If anything, this game was only Sai's last desperate gasp of life before he passed from this world to the next. This game- *that move*- wasn't the origin of his disappearance. Their problems went back further; all the way to their first meeting, perhaps. The furious demand for a game in Touya-meijin's salon: the game Hikaru had *run* from. *That*, was where it started. The day that Hikaru started to want to play himself. The day he wanted to be a part of something that days before hadn't meant *anything* to him, and now suddenly he *could not live without*.

It was this desire that brought about the end.

Hikaru rolled the cheap glass stone between his fingers, eyeing the board as exhaustion crept up on him.

If I had the chance to replay the hands of my own life, Hikaru thought idly as moonlight caught the glass in hand and shone, I'd play it differently. I'd use all my experience, all my patience and intellect, and I'd find a way for both colours to coexist.

Hikaru slammed the stone down in a completely different part of the board.

"If you'd played here, both groups would have survived," Hikaru muttered. White *and* black would have survived that encounter. Maybe Kouyou-sensei would never have retired. Maybe Sai would eagerly anticipate the rematch, thrilled to once again have a chance to grow even stronger. The third path. The one he *should* have followed, if only he had had the ability to see it.

Hikaru flopped backwards, letting his arms rest on the floor above his head, and closed his eyes with a long, tired sigh.

Once a stone is placed on the board, it can't be taken back or moved. That was a failing of humans like Hikaru. He could only see God-Hands in retrospect. The important junctions only became apparent once they were already played. So even *knowing* about them was fruitless. Just as there were no take-backs or do-overs in Go, so it was with life.

Spirits, Hikaru thought, sleepily, if you can give a hyperactive suicidal ghost a second and third chance, couldn't you give ME a second chance?

He drifted off with this ludicrous question plaguing his mind as exhaustion finally claimed him. And it was too bad, really; because if he had stayed awake a moment longer, perhaps Hikaru would have heard the Spirits answer.

Chapter 2

Sixteen going on Twelve

Hikaru woke to the incessant beeping of his alarm. He roused only enough to roll over and slam a hand down onto the snooze button - or might have, had he been on target - his hand found only empty air. He flailed a bit, grunting in annoyance as the shrill sound continued to draw him further and further from his lethargy. Moments later, when his brain started throbbing from the racket, he cracked his eyes open, blearily reassessed the intervening distance between his hand and his alarm-clock, then, with great suffering motion, leaned halfway out of bed and slammed a hand triumphantly down on the snooze button.

Green digital numerals seared themselves into the back of his eyeballs.

7:00am, it read.

Why is my alarm set so early? He wondered, irritated. *I don't have a match today.* And he distinctly remembered asking the Go Association to book time off after the tournament, so it wasn't as if he was scheduled for any teaching seminars; but it wasn't like his alarm could just set *itself*, either. More likely he had set it out of habit. He *had* been tired last night. Never mind setting the alarm, he couldn't even remember getting into bed.

He sat up and rubbed eyelids crusted with sleepies. He blinked several times to clear his vision and froze as the oddness of his surroundings crept into his conscious awareness. This led to an important discovery: there was something seriously *wrong* with the dimensions of his room.

More specifically?

His furniture had grown overnight. Desk, bookshelves, TV all seemed marginally disproportionate; the lump his feet made under the bedspread stopped far short of the end of his bed; and when he sloughed his sheets and shuffled to sit at the edge of the bed, his legs swung helplessly in open air because the floor fell further than his feet could reach.

Still groggily throwing vestiges of sleep, Hikaru catalogued these anomalies with vague detachment. His eyes blinked repeatedly, then eventually fluttered closed as his brain returned an, " *unable to process, rebooting!*" error message.

Footsteps approached his door and his mother popped her head inside his room.

"Hikaru? It's time to get..." she startled when she noticed him sitting up in bed. "Oh, you're already up. I think that's a first. Breakfast is ready." Without a care for his privacy she waltzed into his room and picked up a sweater Hikaru didn't remember dropping in the middle of his floor. It was his favourite 05 hoody: the one that he'd lost somewhere on a train back in junior high school. "You didn't have a bath last night, did you?" she inquired, neatly folding the garment up and placing it beside him on the bed.

Hikaru stared at the hoody, then up at his mother. He couldn't even *remember* the last time his mother had come into his room to get him up for breakfast, much less inquired about his personal hygiene . That wasn't exactly something you asked your sixteen year-old son.

And since when did his mother *loom* over him? Hikaru had to crane his neck to keep her in his field of view.

She took his baffled silence as guilty implicit agreement. "I thought so. Since you didn't have a bath, don't just wash your face, have a shower, please." She brushed his cheek fondly and dropped a kiss on his forehead (making Hikaru go briefly cross-eyed), then she tugged at his fringe with a frown. "I wish you'd let me take you to my hairdresser to fix this, Hikaru. I know your father doesn't care if you

need to exercise your individuality, but this just looks scruffy. I'm worried your teacher is going to call home again."

The memory hit him like a dump truck. He remembered his mother walking in and complaining about his hair on a morning *just like this one*. She complained about his hair, Hikaru had gotten angry and stormed out of the house without even eating breakfast. At school he had been so hungry he couldn't concentrate on that infamous social studies test and he'd bombed it, big time. The first and only time Hikaru had gotten 8% on a test.

Only problem was, Hikaru had been *twelve* at the time. And he certainly wasn't...

Hikaru blinked and studied his hands. They were small. His hands were studded with short stubby fingers. He wiggled them. They wiggled back. He flexed them, then made a weak fist. They obeyed. Then he noted he was wearing his former favourite pair of Doraemon pyjamas which hadn't fit him since he'd had that growth spurt at the beginning of junior high school. And suddenly everything made sense.

Oh, Hikaru remarked idly. *That's why everything is so weird. I'm dreaming*. He slumped and released an aggravated breath. He really hated dreams where he *knew* it was a dream. They were *such* a pain to wake up from!

How do you wake up when you're already awake? Now *that* was a nostalgic question. He had asked Sai that question years ago and they had bickered about whether people could choose to wake up from a dream or whether that part was actually just another part of the dream. It had been a silly argument, one which Hikaru had won when he pointed out that Sai hadn't slept for a thousand years so what the heck did *he* know about dreams, anyway?!

Barfing in the toilet for an hour afterwards during Sai's fit of depression was *almost* worth winning that argument.

His mother, apparently misinterpreting his facial expression, was quick to reassure him: "Oh, I don't mean it looks bad, Hikaru." She ran her fingers through his hair fondly, ineffectually trying to smooth his bed-head. "But the stylist can neaten it up a little. Why don't we go after school?"

Since Hikaru would be awake shortly he just grunted a grudging agreement. The pleased smile he received almost made him squirm with guilt.

Ever since he had first started his career as a professional Go player, his mother's smiles had become the exception rather than the rule. Smiles turned into frowns, laugh-lines turned into concerned furrows - everything about her just got old, all of a sudden. She fretted for her son and his dubious line of work that she could never fully comprehend, worried he had grown up and joined the workforce too quickly without getting a proper education first. Who knew such a simple agreement would lighten her mood to such an extent? It was a *hairstylist* .

He picked at the hair dusting his cheek, noting it was a bit long and the ends were rough and split. He had never been very good at taking care of his hair, especially when he was younger. Self grooming had been fairly low on his priority list at this age. Arcades, sports, and manga had been his manna in grade-school.

Before Go.

"Good," she said, quite pleased now that Hikaru hadn't mustered any resistance. "We'll go after school. That means you definitely need a shower now." She stood and made to leave. "You had better hurry up or your father is going to eat your share of breakfast! And don't forget to comb your hair."

Hikaru snorted as his mother vacated the room. It was hard to imagine that that threat had once sent him into a blind shower-dress-tumble-down-the-stairs panic. There was no way his caring parents would ever send him to school without breakfast; but these sorts of

things are never obvious when you're young and insecure, and not eating breakfast is the worst suffering you can imagine.

He flexed his legs and studied his bare feet as he wiggled his toes. He had forgotten how *small* he had been when he was twelve. He was the shortest boy in his grade; heck, even Akari topped him by a head at this age. Didn't matter though. At five foot short he was still the fastest in his entire grade, could play football like *nobody's* business, and he was the uncontested *Emperor* of Dodge-ball.

He shook his head. *Anyway... time to wake up, I guess.* He pulled back his sleeve and pinched himself. *Hard.*

A sharp jolt of pain ran up his arm. " *YEOW! That HURT!*" he shouted, shaking his arm out and glowering, feeling inordinately betrayed by the pain.

"Hikaru! What are you doing up there?" his mother's muffled voice echoed from somewhere downstairs. "I don't hear the shower running!"

Hikaru stared incredulously at the rapidly reddening patch of irritated skin on his forearm: his incredibly small forearm lacking any sort of hair; his incredibly small, incredibly *sore* forearm that was now demanding his attention by being all throbbly and hurting and -

He dug his thumb and knuckle into his thigh and *viced* the digits together.

" **Grk!** " He glared first at his silly looking fingers, then down at his leg, which was now in considerable pain. "That *hurt!*" It wasn't supposed to hurt! He was supposed to *wake up!*

"Hikaru!" His mother reminded him. "What are you doing up there?"

"Nothing!" The automatic protest emerged in a high combative voice that sounded altogether too young and too... *real*. Hikaru gulped and tentatively probed at his neck. Soft, downy skin met his fingers;

joining collar bone to head smoothly and, most importantly, *lacking* the familiar bulge of his Adam's Apple.

Hikaru's thoughts stuttered then turned into something more resembling white static-y noise.

He jumped off his bed and nearly face-planted when his legs buckled under a barely familiar weight-distribution. He regained his feet in a scramble. Details lashed out at him as he padded over to his wall mirror. There was no goban packed away beside his dresser. The pictures of his time as an Insei were notably missing from the walls. Instead of being filled with books of tsumego and game records by the likes of Shusaku, Ota Yuzo, and Touya Meijin, amongst other Go paraphernalia, his bookcase was filled with manga and playstation games. A small TV sat in one corner beside his playstation console and was notably dust-free. His desk was a complete mess, strewn with various familiar workbooks he recognized from his time in Grade Six: an unfinished sheet of homework for social studies forefront among the mess.

The details were too precise for a dream. Dreams *never* had this much *stuff* in them. Even the most realistic ones. Details were always fuzzy, not razor sharp and containing more information than Hikaru could possibly dredge from the depths of his memory.

If the pain hadn't convinced him that something was *very very wrong*, looking in the mirror did. A pudgy-cheeked Hikaru, five-foot short, stared back at him with wide green eyes framed by his trademark two toned bleached dye-job. *A very messy, dye job. My roots are showing.* He plucked at the buttons of his pyjamas and watched as his double mirrored his action. He pulled up his top and stared at the bruise he knew would be on the lip of his hip, where an elbow had knocked him the day before when he had been playing football after school. It was a delicious purple-blue.

Suddenly he felt *very, very* dizzy. And his chest felt tight and it was hard to breathe. His hand encountered the mirror in an effort to keep himself upright.

This... is not a dream. He thought furiously as he stared unblinkingly into his own eyes, trying to piece together events from last night. The tournament. His loss. Returning to his room. Regret. Playing Sai's last game of...

Sai.

He took a deep breath, heart pounding in his ears.

If this wasn't a dream, then *Sai* was sitting in his grandfather's shed, waiting for someone who could see the blood spattered on his goban. Today, Hikaru would get 8% on the social studies test. His parents would stop his allowance until his marks improved. This would incite Hikaru to seek pawnable goodies from the storage shed in his grandfather's backyard so he could go to the arcades with his friends.

Today was the beginning of *everything*.

His stomach lurched. He tore out of his room and made for the bathroom.

I think I'm going to be sick.

Chapter 3

Sixteen going on Twelve

Shindo Hikaru was sixteen.

That is to say, Shindo Hikaru was twelve.

No, rather, Shindo Hikaru was twelve and sixteen, both. Or, maybe neither.

Shindo Hikaru was sixteen... going on twelve?

I'm sixteen going on twelve?!

He figured if he repeated that phrase enough times it might make sense one day. So he latched onto it like a life-preserver tossed into his ocean of *things I should think about but I won't because they make my brain hurt*.

Sixteen going on twelve. Yeah... *twelve* . *That* twelve. Like, before puberty. Before voice-cracking. Before hormones. Before *pubic hair* .

It was *c-r-e-e-p-y*.

I am sixteen going on twelve. And yeah... this wasn't even the strangest thing that had happened in his short life. That event had a **HELLO my name is: S-A-I** sticker pasted all over it.

Sixteen going on twelve.

He stumbled to school in a bit of a daze with this singular thought percolating through his head. His mother had been reluctant to let him out of the house once she realized he had been sick up in the toilet, but Hikaru staunchly refused to stay home. He needed the fresh air to clear his mind. He needed to see more of this strange, nostalgic world; convince himself that this *definitely* wasn't a dream.

Some nagging part of his mind expected that he would startle awake and find himself back in his room, on the floor where he'd fallen asleep.

But he didn't wake up; not when he tripped over the lip of a curb that had been fixed and yet quite clearly had *not yet* been fixed and banged his shin; not when he ran into a telephone pole because he had been staring at the previously deceased Yamato-family dog growling at him through their fence; not even when he broke the skin of his lip as he worried it between his teeth as he meandered through a small park that hadn't been turned into a housing development due to the falling number of children in the neighbourhood.

He got so many cases of déjà-vu in those first hundred paces down the street that he must have broken some sort of time-continuum record.

The pain of losing to Ko Yeong-ha was lost inside a whirlwind of confusion. The hows and whys of his situation came and went and the only thing he got for his efforts was a bloody shin from the curb, a bruised lip from worry, a pinkish bump on his forehead thanks to that stupid pole, and some terrible indigestion from all the things he didn't want to think about but couldn't help thinking about!

Thankfully, his feet seemed to remember the way to school because he *did* eventually end up at his desk, surrounded by his giggling and chatty friends that he hadn't seen for *ages*. Daisuke, Souji, Murata, Masayoshi... Hikaru attached names to faces numbly. A boy with freckles dashed liberally across the bridge of his nose (whose name slipped his mind entirely) was excitedly telling him and the group of boys nearby about the J-League match he had watched on television last night. Hikaru listened with half an ear as excited voices washed over him... around him... through him.

This is crazy, Hikaru thought for the -enth time, I'm not twelve. I'm sixteen.

As the shock and confusion and general weirdness of his new position in the apparent body of his twelve year old self began to wear off, wonder began to replace it.

He was really here; in the past.

I'm sixteen going on twelve, Hikaru repeated his new mantra, grounding himself to the only piece of information that seemed to make sense in this absurd situation he found himself in.

This is nuts.

"Hikaru!" a familiar voice startled him out of his reverie. He turned his head, only to find himself facing a very young, very *tall* Akari, who stood over his desk impatiently, expression full of storm clouds and brewing thunder. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

Hikaru stared for a moment of complete incomprehension before his mind snapped into action.

That's right. I used to walk to school with Akari every morning. She lived just down the street, after all. They had been neighbours *forever*. A contrite apology on the tip of his tongue, Hikaru quickly caught himself. *My twelve year old self would never have apologized to Akari*, he realized.

"Er... oops?" he tried, feeling every joule of lame he had just channelled.

"Oops?" Akari leaned in, dangerous vibes radiating off her. "That's all you have to say? *Oops?*" she seethed. "Hikaru! I walked all the way to your house only to find out from aunty you had already left!"

Hikaru scratched the back of his head and laughed sheepishly. He should have kept up the conversation, because his laughter only cued his friends to break out the teasing.

"Oh! Is your girlfriend pissed at you, Hikaru?"

"If you get too close to her she might *kiss you!* "

One of them made wet kissing noises and they all broke out into hooting laughter. Hikaru watched with some amusement at the shade of embarrassed red Akari had turned, and the way she had jerked away from him as if scalded. They had always had a hard time interacting at school, mostly because at this stage in life boys were still mostly uninterested in pursuing the opposite sex - unless of course, they were into sports and videogames and horror movies.

She stomped her foot decisively, glaring at Hikaru and the laughing boys. "Boys are so stupid!" she huffed as she whirled on her heels and stalked to her seat at the back of the classroom where her own friends congregated. "This isn't over, Hikaru!" she warned in parting.

"Ugh, how do you stand her?" one of his friends wanted to know, making a face at her back. Hikaru was stunned by the extreme irony this statement entailed. The *last* time he had seen this particular boy was at the Haze Jr. High School graduation, when, red-faced and nervous, he had tried to confess to Akari and been shot down in spectacular fashion.

"Oi, Hikaru? Are you okay? You're kinda spacey today." Masayoshi wondered, freckled nose crinkled with concern.

Spacey? Yeah, sorry about that. I'm really Hikaru from four years into the future. I feel old hanging around in this classroom. Because that conversation would go over well!

Thankfully he was given reprieve by the arrival of their teacher and eventually their surprise social studies test, which drove all thoughts of Shindou's strange behaviour from his year-mates' heads.

Did I really fail this test? Hikaru wondered, moments after they had been allowed to turn over their tests and begin. It was mostly basic general knowledge questions, fill in the blanks with important names and important dates. His pen darted quickly through the answers, surprised by how much of this test he remembered, and how many

questions were simplified versions of future essay-type tests in high school where you needed more than just a few names and dates to receive a decent mark.

His hand hesitated as he inked his last answer. A sense of disconnection and disorientation stealing him for a moment before he tentatively gripped reality once again by repeating his new incredulous credo:

I'm sixteen going on twelve.

But *why*? He stared at the test on his desk until his eyes began to water, but there were no answers there. Well, there were answers, sure, and they were probably all correct too; but they weren't the answers he was looking for. He was in the past. He remembered everything he had done... or was it everything he *would* do? *Would* have done? Was it possible that maybe he *hadn't* lived as a sixteen year old he just dreamed of the future?

That paradigm actually made his head hurt. But no, he dismissed that idea. He was living inside his twelve year old self with memories of his sixteen year old self. It was absurd and silly and...

And Sai is alive. His mind obsessed over that single idea.

Well, not *alive* alive. But he existed. Or, he *should*. Hikaru, after that mess with his mother, the toilet, and the undignified contents of his stomach, had decided he would take a train over to his grandfather's house after school instead of going to the arcade with his friends - he would see for himself if Sai existed here. And if he *did* then Hikaru would know for *sure* this was all real. Real, as in he was really sixteen going on twelve.

Hikaru wasn't sure what terrified him more. That he had been maybe sort of given a second chance. Or that he had *asked* for a second chance and the *kami* that Hikaru hadn't even really *believed* to exist actually *existed*!

A ghost? Yeah, that was one thing. But the kami of the land? Yeah. Totally another box of weird and supernatural and scary. Respecting the spirits of the land just because everybody else did it was totally different than actually worshipping them because, you know, *they actually freaking existed !*

This direction of thought, of course, begged the question: If a spirit had helped him go back in time... *which spirit had done it?* The God of Go? Sai seemed to believe there was one. And after this Hikaru wasn't sure there *wasn't* . Faith and Proof were two totally different cans of worms. Now he had opened both of them.

Hikaru capped his pen, turned over his sheet, put his head down and squeezed his eyes shut, blocking the light and the sight of his earnest classmates scratching away at their own test-papers.

By the time he straightened any of this out inside his head he was going to have the mother of all headaches.

Urg. And Sai is not going to make my head feel better. Not if he forces his way into my head like he did last time with all the eager delicacy of a hyperactive and clumsy child.

His stomach felt queasy but his mind was giddy.

I'm sixteen going on twelve. And Sai is here.

If this was a dream, Hikaru wasn't at all sure he wanted to wake up.

Chapter 4

Sixteen going on Twelve

Plans tend to go awry.

"Hikaru, you promised." Akari said, tugging on his arm.

"For the last time, *I didn't!*" He tugged back, forgetting for a moment that even though he was smaller than Akari, he was still a *lot* stronger, and nearly unbalanced her when she refused to let go of his arm. They were making a bit of a scene, as some younger grade-schoolers passing them by on the way out the doors were looking at them and giggling. A precocious first-grader made a kissy-face. Hikaru growled at them, making them laugh and scatter from the shoe-alcove out the doors into the sunlight beyond.

"Aunty told me this morning you *did*. She said I could come too, if I wanted. So I'm coming. And you didn't wait for me this morning. So there!"

"What kind of logic is that?" Hikaru protested.

He had forgotten how stubborn Akari could be when she had decided something; because if he *had*, he would have made a break for the door a little quicker instead of taking the time to explain to his friends why he couldn't come with them to the arcade after school-especially when the 'S' word was involved.

"Ugh, why would *you* want to come anyway? It's not like *you* need your hair cut," Hikaru finally pointed out when the argument continued to degenerate.

Forget my freaking hair! I want to go see Sai! Hikaru thought a bit desperately. *Why did I have to make that stupid promise when I was still under the impression this was all a dream?!*

"Shows what *you* know, Hikaru." She used her free hand to finger the ends of her shoulder-length hair and eyed it thoughtfully. "I need a trim. Maybe a few millimetres. And I need new stockings."

Unconvinced, Hikaru muttered: "It looks fine to me."

"That's because you're a *boy*, Hikaru," Akari pointed out.

"T-that's gender discrimination!"

"Gender Discrimination?" Akari sounded out, the skin of her forehead crinkling.

"A-anyway," Hikaru continued doggedly, before Akari could question him about his sudden knowledge of strange expressions she wouldn't be learning until high-school. "Mom must have forgotten that I promised... that I promised I would go over to Gramp's place after school. I-I haven't visited for a while."

"Huh? Really?" Akari wondered, eyeing him like she always did when she thought he was lying to her.

"Uh yeah I'm..." Hikaru thought frantically. *I need an excuse to go over to Gramp's place, but it's got to be one where Akari won't want to tag along with me.* "Going over to play Go!" Akari didn't like Go yet, as far as he knew. In Grade Six Go was still 'that game old smelly men play'.

"Go?" Akari cocked her head curiously. "I didn't know you played Go with your grandfather."

"Uh... yeah! Oh course! Who else would I learn from but from the man who beat... uh... that guy... lwase or sumthin' from Kut - er... Kutsuwa? or *wherever* -well, that's not important." Hikaru blustered. "The point is. If I beat him he promised to give me 1,000 yen."

Akari huffed at this, but her disbelieving look had disappeared. "It's always about money with you, *Hikaru* ! I feel sorry for your

grandparents if the only way they can get you to visit them is by tempting you with money!"

Yeah, at this age I was a mercenary little brat, Hikaru recalled fondly.

He tugged on his arm again. "If I don't leave now I'm going to miss the train."

"Fine! Then I'm coming with you!"

Arg! That's definitely not going to happen! The last thing he needed was another ambulance ride when Akari panicked after he fainted!

"Ugh! No way! What happened to your desperate urge to go shopping?" Hikaru demanded.

"There's no point if you're not going," Akari declared. "I *hate* going to the stylist by myself. We'll just go another day otherwise you'll *never* go."

This was another thing that Hikaru missed out on in the future: having Akari double-team him about stuff like this with his mother.

"But you don't even know how to play Go," Hikaru pointed out, glancing impatiently at his watch. "It might take hours. Are you just going to sit there doing nothing? You'll get bored and complain."

"No I won't."

"You will too."

"Then you can explain it to me on the way so I won't get bored!" Akari said.

"There's no way I can explain Go to you that quickly, stupid! Besides, if we're late you'll get in trouble with your parents."

"Hikaru! You're being stubborn!"

"I'm not being stubborn. You're the one who's insisting on coming!" Hikaru said.

Akari stomped her foot, but did grudgingly release his arm so she could cross her arms. "Fine! But you have to promise we'll go tomorrow."

Hikaru gave her a funny look. "What? To my grandparents? I didn't know you liked them so much."

"No, stupid!" Akari exclaimed, exasperated. "Shopping!"

"Oh-Don't call me stupid!" *Why am I even involved in this totally juvenile argument?* Hikaru wondered. Old habits die hard. "A-anyway, we'll see tomorrow. I gotta go or I'm going to miss the train. Later Akari!"

" *Hikaru!* " was Akari's frustrated farewell as Hikaru burst through the doors of the school and made a break for the train station nearest to the school.

Safe! A sweaty and panting Hikaru thought as he slipped through the doors of the departing train. Being short *did* have some advantages on the train, he could slip easily through the after-school crush to less crowded positions, and he took full advantage, shouldering and squirming his way through the sometimes sweaty, sometimes clammy, oftentimes stinky press of bodies to get a good spot near a pole he could lean his brace his weight as the train picked up speed out of the station.

In order to meet Sai, all Hikaru had to do was borrow his grandfather's spare storage shed key (kept in a jar in the kitchen) and find the old Goban stored on the second floor. An idle remark about the strange bloodstains and Sai 2.0 should load back into his head. *Well... that's the easy part.* Hikaru rubbed the furrowed skin between his eyebrows as he thought.

If he remembered correctly (and it was difficult to remember as the memories he retained from the time following Sai's disappearance were mostly a jumble of desperation, longing, and agonizing regret) Sai had *known* he was disappearing before it had happened. He had first mentioned it the day after grandpa's storage shed had been raided, when he claimed the bloodstains were fading.

Having the old Goban around would allow him to monitor the bloodstains, but actually removing it without his grandfather's agreement was out of the question. Putting aside the transportation issues involved in lugging the solid kaya Goban via the train during rush-hour, the Goban itself was one of the few mementos that the Shindo patriarch had of his deceased brother. No matter how much begging or cajoling he had done in the future, his grandfather had stubbornly refused to be parted with the cursed Goban (although his concern for Hikaru getting cursed may have also played a role in his habitual refusal). Hikaru could only imagine what sort of ruckus he would have caused had his initial plan to pawn the Goban for money succeeded. His Grandfather probably would have strung him up by his heels and flayed him with a heavy sock full of go stones.

He made and discarded several plans to wrangle the Goban out of Heihachi's hands legitimately, but none of them sounded any more promising than the plans his future self had already attempted; not to mention they were all further complicated by Hikaru's regressed age and perceived immaturity. Betting with his grandfather for pocket-change was one thing, but he doubted the old man would ever put up the board as collateral-especially since Hikaru wasn't exactly known for the meticulous care of his possessions at this age.

Sai didn't start worrying about disappearing until after his online victory over Touya's dad, Hikaru thought idly as he watched several uniformed high-schoolers with sports-bags shove their way to claim prime spots near Hikaru, one of whom noticed Hikaru's bland examination and smiled his own brand of nostalgia. So I have at least that long to figure stuff out assuming I don't mux things up too badly.

Sai had never really explained *what* it was about that game that had begun the countdown. Was it the fact that Hikaru had declared that he wasn't going to let Sai play publicly any longer? Or had Sai somehow realized something about his own existence he hadn't been aware of earlier? Was it satisfaction or hopelessness that had driven him away?

It was hard to say that the blood disappearing and the Meijin-Sai game were related, because they hadn't paid the Goban a visit beforehand. Had the blood been steadily disappearing since Sai took up residence inside his consciousness? Like a timer ticking down the last minutes of Sai's existence on this plane? Or was there an event that made the blood and by association, Sai, disappear? (or at the very least hasten his disappearance?) More importantly, was there a way to stop Sai from disappearing?

Hikaru licked his lips as this line of thinking brought up a completely different set of questions. Why was *Torajiro's blood* the key to keeping Sai around ? Sai had indicated that he possessed the Goban *before* his first host. *So if Sai had been possessing the Goban before Shuusaku died, why was the blood on the Goban so important?*

His mental reasoning hit a bit of a dead end there, and so Hikaru decided to make a rough mental timeline from what he remembered from Sai's explanation:

(1) Sai dies in the Heian Period, around 1000 years ago, give or take a century or two, having been accused of cheating at Go in front of the Emperor. Presumably, Sai drowns himself in a pond and unable to rise to heaven, possesses a Goban.

(2) Many years later in the mid nineteenth century, Sai meets a young Kuwabara Torajiro and possesses him. Together, with Sai, their talent rises to legendary proportions. Eventually they would become known as Honinbo Shuusaku, one of the greatest Go players to ever live.

(3) August 10, 1862, Torajiro dies tending cholera patients within the Shuusaku household. His death would leave bloodstains on the Goban that have something to do with Sai being able to possess the Goban *after* Torajiro's death.

(4) Present Day: Hikaru spots the bloodstains Torajiro left on the Goban. Sai possesses him.

(5) For some reason, around four years later, the bloodstains eventually fade, and with them, Sai.

It was clear that Hikaru was missing several pieces of information to tie all those events together. The first being: what made the Goban special in the first place? What allowed Sai to possess *this* Goban? Why did he need the Goban at all when he was possessing *Hikaru* ? It almost seemed like he wasn't really *possessing* Hikaru, but just using him like a car to get around town while his *home* remained inside the goban.

The second piece of information he was missing had to do with Torajiro. How had Sai discovered that Torajiro could be possessed? In Hikaru's case, he had been able to see the bloodstains that Torajiro had left on the Goban, but those hadn't been there *before* Torajiro, had they? Sai had clearly told him they belonged to his previous host. So how had Sai discovered he could possess Torajiro after 800 and some years of *nothing*? And furthermore, did the way in which Sai had possessed Torajiro differ from how he had previously possessed Hikaru?

And finally, was the vanishing bloodstain the *cause* of Sai's disappearance, or was it merely a *symptom* of some greater illness - some greater *wrong* ?

Even if he can't answer why he disappeared in the future, Sai should be able to at least give me answers to the first two questions, Hikaru thought. And those answers may even suggest why or how Sai might disappear. Hikaru was quite sure *something* had gone wrong.

Why else would the spirits send Hikaru back in time? He couldn't imagine the manipulation of time and space was done whimsically.

Although, having never met a divine spirit, maybe coming to such a conclusion was a bit premature.

Chapter 5

Sixteen going on Twelve

Shindo Heihachi had been a successful railway engineer before his eventual forced retirement in his sixties when the Japanese government privatized the nationally owned railway company. From the future Hikaru knew that financially, the Shindo patriarch was well-off since his brother died a bachelor and left him a significant inheritance to supplement the generous pension he received. As a result, Shindo Heihachi had been able to purchase one of the more traditional Japanese houses in a fairly trendy neighbourhood.

The Shindo house, being one of the last remaining single-story traditional Japanese houses on the block with a yard and a two-story outbuilding, had always been a bit of a stand-out with the neighbours, and Hikaru always received interested looks whenever he visited.

It was easy enough to sneak into the house and grab the spare key while his grandmother had her back turned in the kitchen and Gramps battled constipation in the bathroom.

He hopped off the traditional porch unseen and navigated past the latest additions to his Grandmother's rock garden to gain access to the shed itself. Clumsy fingers fumbled the padlock twice before he managed to seat the key properly and remove the offending object. Upon entering, he stopped as yet another moment of déjà-vu struck him. The familiar smell of dust tickled his nose. Old furniture and spare paper for the sliding screens occupied one corner. Boxes filled with old books, ancient tomes, and yellowing scrolls were piled in another. His grandfather's extensive model train collection occupied an entire wall beside the stairs which Hikaru eyed as he padded his way upwards, footsteps disturbing the fine layer of dust that had settled in the intervening periods of disuse.

Poking his head up over the landing, Hikaru observed the mess of antiques and collectibles and useless junk his grandparents had accrued over their lifetimes with a resigned feeling. The smell of must was heavier up here where free-floating particles of dust caught the last rays of the sun striking the dirty window up in the rafters.

If I remember correctly, Hikaru thought as he moved carefully past shelves heavy with odds and ends, the goban is stuck inside an old trunk somewhere over... here!

Ten minutes later, Hikaru had finally cleared enough space to drag the battered old trunk from its cubby-hole out onto the floor. He cracked the lid, held his breath, and squeezed his eyes shut until the majority of the disturbed dust had settled, and then opened the heavy lid entirely so that it rested on its straining brass hinges.

Inside the chest, nestled in one corner surrounded by years of collectible Go paraphernalia, books of tsumego, and old pictures of a younger Heihachi posing with various retired pros, was the familiar Kaya Goban. Hikaru's eyes devoured the sight of the bold lacquered lines even as his fingers brushed gently over the fine grain of the wood that had clearly been carefully maintained through the years. His throat grew thick as his gaze finally encountered the smudged smears and drops of blood that looked so much like tears, spoiling an entire corner of the ancient Goban.

Sai, Hikaru thought, eyes suddenly burning. He struggled a moment and failed to master the surge of grief and terror that gripped his throat as he fought to say *something*. But each time he opened his mouth to childishly inquire about the stains marring the board, he fought embarrassing sobs that threatened to escape his lips instead of the innocent query he meant to express.

Why did you leave me? Hikaru wanted to yell. *You were the one who stubbornly clung to me and dragged me kicking and screaming into the world of Go!* Hikaru's fingers trembled as they traced stains he could see but could not feel. *How dare you... How dare you leave*

me right when I needed you most! When I began to love Go just as much as you did! Do! ARGH!

His hands curled into small fists as one last desperate grievance flashed through his sadness.

We could have worked it out if only you had stayed. Why didn't you stay? It's not right to just - barge into someone's life, make yourself indispensable, make them love you, and then vanish without a trace! It's not right! It's not - fair. It's not-

The soft *plip* of liquid and his wet cheeks alerted Hikaru to his plight, leaning over the goban his tears beaded where they fell, leaving no mark, only a trail of dampness as he brushed them away with his hand.

He had failed Sai. Sai had failed him. What did it *matter* anyway? Hikaru was human, and Sai - well, as inhuman as he appeared, he was no Divine Spirit, he was human too. Just as flawed, just as *selfish* as anyone else on the planet.

Hikaru pulled a deep, fortifying breath of air into his lung, and finally reached deep into the trunk and hefted the solid wooden goban from its hiding place - quite an effort for his undersized frame. He set it down on a patch of mottled and dusty sunlight and wiped his eyes carefully with a corner of his sleeve before he flopped down beside it. He shoved his grief, his anger, his helplessness, and his betrayal into the darkest depths of his mind and resolved to forget about them for a time.

He would do Sai and himself - and all the people who needed Sai and himself - *right*, this time. After all, he was sixteen going on twelve and he was about to meet his not-so-imaginary friend again for the first time.

"So, *this* is my great-uncle's cursed Goban, huh?" Hikaru said. "It doesn't look so scary." The phrase had sounded cooler inside his head. When stated with his adolescent voice it came out more whiny

and sullen and a bit sad compared to the taunting drawl he attempted. "But - huh..." Hikaru's fingers hesitated a moment over the bloodstains, a moment of concern passing through him like the wind before he girded himself. He rubbed at the stains lightly. "It can't be as valuable as Grandfather claimed if it has these - these ugly stains on it. Priceless antique my butt."

" *Can you hear my voice?* "

Hikaru stopped moving - stopped *breathing* . Sai's gentle, curious voice sent gooseflesh prickling all over his arms and legs. Wide-eyed, Hikaru glanced around the room. There was dust. There was clutter. But there was no Sai - *where was Sai?*

"W-who's there?" Hikaru stammered, heart thudding heavily, eyes prickling. Expectation and a bit of fear made him light-headed. This was one of the few moments of his young self of which he had very little recollection. He could remember the creepy disembodied voice and then - he woke up in a hospital with a person hovering over his bed that the doctors and nurses couldn't see.

" *You can.* " the disembodied voice exclaimed: awe, wonder, excitement all roused. "*You can,* " he said again with such desperate longing it physically hurt Hikaru to hear. His eyes were tearing up again, damn-it! "*Divine Spirits, I thank you.* " The air turned heavy and electric. Hikaru could feel *something* shifting in the air around him. The familiar scent of Kaya trees, ink, and old parchment that Hikaru had always associated with Sai filled his nostrils, and a familiar presence tugged at something deep and intimate inside his mind.

There was a brief flash of voluminous white fabric, long hair, manicured eyebrows, and desperate longing eyes, before the image - misty cloud - *being* was sucked straight into his body.

Trying not to panic at the alien sensation, Hikaru gasped as Sai's presence tentatively touched *something* inside his chest. Touched *him* as if he were able to touch all of the sensitive bits of Hikaru's

being with a single puff of exhaled breath. All of Hikaru's senses were screaming - just like they did last time - *intruder ! Does not belong ! Alien ! Fight it ! GET **OUT** !* But Hikaru, as he held himself rigid before Sai's goban, fingers digging desperately into his palms, suppressed the feeling and refused to lash out. It *does* belong! Hikaru insisted. He belongs *here* with *me*! There's enough room for the both of us in here!

Finding the path of least resistance, the feeling strengthened - Sai's presence strengthened. Joy. Sadness. Loneliness. Crushing regret. With Sai's ballooning presence came a tsunami of alien feelings and sensation, so strong that Hikaru's vision blurred and then blacked-out for a moment under the sheer *power* and *depth* and *volume* of each feeling. There were no *words* to the firing circuits inside his head - nothing distinct or tangible. Everything Sai felt, that gamut of tumultuous emotion that held his spirit together, charged through Hikaru. He cried under the crushing weight of regret. Losing to a cheater. Betrayed by a rival. Shamed at being run from the capital, honourless. Abandoned by his family. Friendless until the end. No more hands, no more games, *no more Go* . There was only despair and loneliness and *water filling his lungs* .

Hikaru gasped from where he had fallen over, sucking dust and air into his lungs desperately. He stared at the blurry side of the goban uncomprehendingly for a moment, wondering when he had collapsed onto the floor, and why he felt so weak; when a voice, accompanied by a deep wellspring of guilt and concern that spread across his consciousness like soothing balm, tentatively called out to him.

"Are you alright?" the familiar voice asked.

Shoving aside his weakness, Hikaru pushed himself upright, rubbed his now puffy eyes clear of tears, and glanced desperately around the room. Though the voice sounded in his ears, the room remained vacant of life.

He's not... there? Hikaru thought desperately. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. The dull throbbing behind his eyes only strengthened.

"W-where are you?" Urgh, wait. That wasn't the question he should be asking. " *Who* are you?"

"Please, do not be afraid, child," Sai crooned. "I mean you no harm. I have taken residence in your consciousness. I-" Sai hesitated a moment. A flash of loneliness, desperation, and guilt renewed the unpleasant pounding going on behind his eyeballs. If he hadn't *already* been accustomed to Sai's overwhelming emotional onslaughts, he may well have blacked out under the pressure. He certainly had the first time. Sai continued quietly. "It has been a long time since someone has been able to see me or hear my voice; as a result, it will be some time before I am again strong enough to manifest myself before thee."

Manifest before thee? Hikaru swallowed the snort that threatened to escape and nearly passed out when the effort made his vision grey-out. *I had forgotten how Sai spoke when I first met him. He was invisible while the hospital kept me overnight for observation. In fact, I don't remember him talking to me at all after I collapsed. Not until the next morning, anyway. Just when I had convinced myself I had inhaled too much dust and imagined the whole incident.*

"My name," Sai continued, "is Fujiwara no Sai. And for one-hundred years I have been waiting for one such as you."

Hikaru was actually glad he couldn't see Sai right now. The urge to jump him and smother the wayward spirit with his grief was irresistible - and wouldn't that be just *awkward* . *This* Sai didn't know him yet. As far as *this* Sai was concerned, Hikaru was just another Kuwabara Torajiro - a vessel that would allow him to play as much Go as he wanted.

"So, what you're saying is-" Hikaru began slowly after he spent a long moment mastering his swirling apprehension and grabbing at

threads of all the complicated emotions he was enduring, "-this goban really *is* cursed? And now I've been *possessed*? "

"Cursed... you say? *Possessed* ? Well," Sai said haltingly, sounding offended while trying to sound reassuring. "I wouldn't go so far as to say the goban is *cursed* . I... don't like that word. Because *cursing* and *possessing* is what *evil spirits* do. And I'm not an evil spirit. I'm a *good* spirit. I was just inhabiting it and waiting until I found someone to-"

"Possess?" Hikaru interrupted. "And if you were an *evil* spirit, wouldn't you be saying the same thing?" He pointed out dryly. "I think I read that plot in a manga once. Once I go to sleep you'll probably try and suck out my soul or something."

"I would *never*! " Sai protested, his voice clearly flustered. "You'll hardly notice I'm here!"

Until the first airplane flies over head and you panic and make me barf in the middle of the sidewalk, Hikaru thought fondly. Or the first time you make me collapse when I refuse to indulge whatever inconvenient go-playing urge you develop.

"Whatever," Hikaru dismissed. It was odd addressing Sai without being able to see him. It took a lot of the metaphorical wind out of his sails. "But why didn't you possess my grandfather, or his brother before him? They've had it since as long as I can remember. Gramps is convinced the goban is cursed ever since his brother died. That's why he put it away in storage." Hikaru said.

Sai sounded vaguely stumped. "Ah... well, I tried calling out to various people at times, but no-one until you could hear my voice. There have not been many to look upon my goban in a long time, after all. As for why I was inside this goban... it belonged to the last man who could hear my voice."

"Hmm," Hikaru hummed non-committedly while inwardly his attention perked up. "And you possessed *him*, too? This person who owned

this goban before gramps? Because he could see these stains?" Hikaru had, meanwhile, set himself back to kneeling in front of Sai's beloved goban. He ran his fingers carefully over the stains that looked like a mixture of tears and blood but that had no discernible texture to the soft tips of his digits.

A strange fondness surged inside the warm confines of his chest as Sai recalled his first host. "Torajiro was a very kind boy. And he was the first in a long line of owners who could see my tears upon the wood. Once he discovered my regret he indulged my great selfishness. Although," and here Sai's voice grew tentative all of a sudden, "he was not so calm as you when he first heard my voice."

"Probably because manga and anime and television have numbed my sense of self-preservation." Hikaru could feel the confusion rolling around in Sai's head as he used terms that would be unfamiliar to the ghost whose last meaningful interaction with society was in the Edo period.

As easily distracted as ever, Hikaru thought fondly. "But never mind that," he continued before Sai could give voice the questions he no doubt had. "What's a ghost doing haunting my grandfather's goban, anyway? I mean - *why haven't you moved on*. Ghosts have those, right? Regrets? That's why you're a ghost in the first place and not in heaven, right?"

It was eerie how Sai's thoughts which were like a gentle hum of noise in the back of his head abruptly stilled.

"You wish to hear my tale?" was the careful inquiry Sai eventually made.

"If you're going to be freeloading in my head, I have a right to know, don't I?" Hikaru said belligerently.

"Ah," he said. "I suppose you do." Sai took a moment where Hikaru could feel various echoes of the previous crushing regrets gather and mute themselves in that corner of his mind that Sai had

appropriated. "If anyone has the right to know it would be you. Ah - but, may I perhaps first be given your name, child? This is not a tale for strangers, after all."

Hikaru didn't bother to suppress his grin this time. "Shindo. It's Shindo Hikaru. And I'm-" *Sixteen going on* "-twelve years old. Since you're not an evil spirit planning on eating my soul, I guess it's nice to meet you," *again* .

" *Hikaru-kun*, then." Sai said, a landscape of contentment contained in that singular statement of identity. "Well, Shindo Hikaru-kun. As I said my name is Fujiwara no Sai, and I have been waiting many years for one such as you..."

"My story, if you could call it that, begins in a time Torajiro's peers call the Heian period. I was born the fourth son to a very minor branch of the Fujiwara clan. Being the fourth son was... *difficult* . Do you have siblings, Hikaru-kun?"

"I don't."

"Well, in those days only the first son would be instructed to inherit the family lands and titles. The rest of us were forced to become subordinate to the main clan - to serve in whatever respect duty demanded. That usually meant becoming minor officials at various ministries at court. But my talents lay elsewhere. I discovered that I had some talent at Go. When my family realized my inherent potential they hired tutors to foster my talent. Go was seen then as being an educated and cultured past-time - one which was very respected among nobility. My family was pleased that I brought honor to the Fujiwara name in such manner, but to be honest I didn't really care about such things when I was young. I simply loved playing. For me there was no greater joy than conversing with others across a goban, using only hands of stones and clashing wits.

"I quickly surpassed my tutors and began traveling. I would earn my way by tutoring others of my clan in the ways of Go, and soon my name became well known. Eventually I was invited to court, where,

through a series of... complicated events," Sai hedged, "I eventually became the Emperor's Go-tutor."

"You knew the *Emperor* ?" Hikaru exclaimed. He didn't actually have to fake the excitement in his voice. This piece of information had long lain inside his head almost entirely unremarked upon. But... hearing Sai's version of events again brought to light the fact that Sai - *his* Sai - probably interacted with the most powerful man in Japan on a daily basis when he was alive and, not only that, but he was a member of *that* Fujiwara clan. The clan that not only intermarried with the Emperor's line but whose leaders often acted as *regents* for Emperors.

"Oh, yes. I was invited to play him one afternoon and-" Sai paused here, awkwardly. "Well, the details are a bit fuzzy actually. It *has* been a long time. But I remember him being quite pleased with me. He decided my talent was so prodigious that I *must* stay at court." His voice turned comically officious. " *This one's talent is not fit to rot in the provinces. Surely the spirits have blessed him in order to teach us* .

"And so, from that day forward I became the Emperor's Go-tutor."

" *Hmm*, " Hikaru hummed, impressed despite knowing all this already. "So you were his first Go-tutor?"

"Oh, no." Sai said. "As I said earlier, the game of Go was a valued and cultured past-time, the Emperor had been taught from a young age. I was by no means his first Go tutor. He already had one - a tutor I mean. In fact, my assignment by royal writ to his court caused... much resentment among rival clans. And none greater than with the man who already held the title of the Emperor's Go-tutor."

"I guess that makes sense," Hikaru said. His finger traced patterns of old half-remembered games upon Sai's goban. "Having spent so much time and effort polishing his skills at Go, he must have been very prideful - about his position and his Go."

"He... yes," Sai said, "that's right. He was my elder in age and experience. I had thought that together we might..." the pleased feeling spreading across their bond quickly morphed into something dark and resentful. "But it's so difficult to explain it all. There was more going on then than I remember now. Many of the names and details have faded with time but this I do remember:

"Regardless of how minor my branch of the clan was, I was *still* a Fujiwara. My colleague was a prominent son of the Taira clan - one of our rivals. My appointment was seen as a clan attempt to usurp control of a valued position at court close to the Emperor. I didn't have any such designs, of course!" Sai said. "All I am, all I was was the Go that I played. I cared not for the games of the court, only for the game I played upon the Goban.

"I was challenged," Sai said dully, his brief spirited rally crushed. "The Emperor should only be taught by the *best*, they said. He does not need *two* when there should only be *one*. To this day I do not know who was responsible for setting up that match. I was naive, ignoring the court intrigue to concentrate on my Go. Was it the Emperor? He resented my clan but *never* appeared to resent me - but what did I know? The *Taira*? I was the better Go player. We sometimes played matches in the Emperor's presence. It was well known my Go was paramount. I was a *stain* upon the Taira's honor.

"We played. The game was much closer than I had anticipated - you see, he had spent our previous matches studying my Go. He had long been preparing for this deciding match and hiding his own hand. My previous victories had all been deceptions! We fought over territory, exchanging sente with every other hand. The game was so close and so complicated even I wasn't sure who held the advantage. And then, *then*, just when the game was reaching its most critical juncture, I noticed one of my stones had accidentally been placed inside his goke. It happens sometimes when the stones are cleared from the board. And normally, when it *does* happen, the discovered stone is simply returned to its owner. But he didn't return it! He simply slipped it into his captured stones pile when no-one was

looking! He cheated! It was unconscionable! Unforgiveable! The game was so close that one point might well have decided the match! But before I could even open my mouth he accused *me* of cheating! *I, who had just seen him blatantly cheat was accused of cheating!* "

Hikaru bit his lip while Sai fell silent, trying and failing to distract himself from the despair Sai was broadcasting. The painful resonance brought tears to his eyes.

"' *Surely,*' the emperor declared, *'a cheater shall never triumph over an honest man. Let victory decide culpability!* ' "

"I was flustered. Angry. I couldn't concentrate. How could anyone believe I would so dishonor the game of Go as to *cheat* ? Go was my *life!* I-

"I lost." Sai said quietly. "I was exiled from the capital and branded a cheater. To avoid having my family and my clan bear the stain of dishonor, I only really had one choice. I took a few days to set my affairs in order. Then I drowned myself in a pond."

Hikaru didn't breath or even attempt to soothe the ache behind his eyes even as it spilled once again onto the marred Kaya beneath his whitened fingers.

Sai's voice turned bittersweet and whimsical. "But somehow... I just couldn't move on. I selfishly wanted to play more Go. My feelings were so strong I... stayed I guess you could say. I found a goban and watched many... *many* games over the years. But while that brought small bouts of gratification, I remained unsatisfied. I couldn't *touch* . And *they* couldn't *hear* . I wanted more than just to *watch* . I wanted to play! To Talk! Go is a conversation! It requires at least *two* people! And... I couldn't converse anymore. I had lost my power to speak. It wasn't until many hundreds of years later when I met Kuwabara Torajirou that my voice would once again regain its previous timbre.

"Ah!" Like waking up from a dream, Sai's presence suddenly rose up inside of him like a giant concerned blanket. "Please, I didn't mean to upset you!"

"Shut up!" Hikaru blustered even as he wiped his cheeks dry and sniffled. "You didn't upset me! Anyone would be moved by a story like that!"

"Still..." Sai fretted. "Please don't get the wrong impression. My life was not one big tragedy. I was happy. Not all the time, but for some time I was truly happy. And I've never been happier than when I spent time with Torajiro! And I'm - *happy* - now. Because once again the spirits have been kind to send me a boy who can hear my voice. Thank you, *Hikaru*. "

Hikaru had to swallow a sob of self-hatred and despair. He took a deep breath in through his nose. "For what?"

"For what? Well - for listening, I guess. For finding me."

"Oh." Inhale - Exhale. "Sure."

"So," Hikaru said, once he had once again mastered himself. "You want to play Go, do you? That's all?"

"Yes! But as I said, it will take some time to manifest myself again. Until then, I shall be patient."

Hikaru frowned. He had been planning to play his grandfather and secure his alibi but if Sai couldn't see...

"Huh, I guess you can't see anything right now?" Hikaru probed.

"Not a thing!" Sai reported happily.

Couldn't you be a little bothered by the fact you're blind? Hikaru thought fondly. But then again this was Sai. And normal conventions didn't really apply to him.

"Ah. But it doesn't bother me," Sai hastily reassured him. "Because being inside you is like hiding in a futon inside a womb of warm blankets. It feels a *little* different than with Torajiro, but you both have the same warmth of *kindness* -you don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No." Hikaru snorted. "That's fine. It's just... weird feeling you." *Not weird, comforting* . "I can feel when you're happy and sad and... stuff."

"Torajirou said much the same thing when I first met him," Sai said, tentatively. "But, please don't be frightened-"

"For the last time I'm not scared!" Hikaru snapped. He rubbed his forehead in frustration when he clearly felt Sai didn't believe him, his headache was not helping his temper, that was for sure. "And shouldn't you been able to, you know, see what I see if you're possessing me?"

"But, Hikaru, I *told* you!" Sai said in that *oh-so-familiar* whinging voice. "That's what *evil* spirits do. And I'm not an evil spirit!"

"So you can't?" Hikaru demanded. This part had always been fuzzy. "Or you won't?"

"I will *never* try to do something so abominable," Sai said almost inaudibly, but with fierce determination. "I might live here but I would never *use* you. Life is *sacred* and your life, your body, is sacrosanct."

Hikaru licked his lips nervously. "So you've never tried to do anything like that before? With Torajiro, I mean."

Sai remained silent and if Hikaru hadn't been paying so close attention to what the ghost was feeling he might have missed the quickly muted flash of longing and regret.

"Torajiro was a very kind man," Sai said, eventually. "He would have let me use his body all the time if I had wanted. But that wasn't what

I wanted. He indulged my whims when it came to Go, but he lived his own life."

That, Hikaru realized, was a very carefully worded answer that didn't answer my question. His curiosity was now fully aroused. A twelve-year-old would never have caught that deflection or made the distinction. *All I would have cared was that Sai couldn't take control of my body .* In fact, Sai's entire manner of interacting with him had already changed. *He's a lot more verbose and less tentative about talking about himself now that he doesn't have to take drastic action to get my attention .* The thought was heartening and worrying that such a small change in behavior could cause Sai to act so differently.

"Boring." Hikaru decided. "If this were a manga or an anime you would totally be able to possess me."

"Ah! That's the second time you've used those words: *manga*, and *anime* . What are they?"

"There's no point in explaining, I'll have to show you later, otherwise you won't understand," Hikaru said, unwilling to get into one of their patented 'this is how it is', 'that's impossible!' arguments that were once so common as Sai acclimatized himself to the twenty-first century. "I was just thinking that I could get my grandfather to play a game of Go... but if you can't see there's no point."

"A game of Go?" The phrase was said by Sai with such reverence and longing. "But... of course it's possible for me to play without seeing the board... if you're willing to tell me where he has moved."

"Blind Go, huh?" Hikaru muttered. He hadn't quite thought of that when he started pursuing this avenue of conversation. He really wanted to see if Sai could actually use parts of his body passively. "But it's not the same right? Seeing the board? Watching your opponent across the board? Feeling the stones between your fingers? It's not like I want you to take over my body. I'm just saying... I wouldn't mind if you see what I can see... that kind of thing." Hikaru paused and worried he might have gone too far. But

when the silence stretched Hikaru knew he was onto something. If it was impossible, Sai would have just sloughed the whole conversation off and gotten excited about playing Go again.

But he hadn't . And what he was feeling wasn't frustration brought on by inability, it was a hesitance balanced on the edge of a razor. *Temptation*, Hikaru hesitantly labelled the unfamiliar feeling.

" *Fujiwara-san?* " Hikaru prompted when the ghost failed to reply.

"Sai," the ghost corrected gently. "Torajirou would always call me Sai, I would be honoured if you would also address me with such familiarity." Hikaru frowned. Sai's emotions had smoothed as he spoke - calmed. Now they whispered only of happiness and resolve. "And while I thank you for your kindness," he continued, "I will not become an existence to be feared or resented."

Hikaru could only huff, exasperated now. He was almost positive Sai had been about to cave. But maybe this wasn't the time to press. Not after their first meeting when they were still virtual strangers.

Still... now that I know the possibility exists...

"Well - whatever," Hikaru said, grunting as he clambered to his feet. "I guess it doesn't matter." He eyed the goban at his feet hesitantly, unsure about whether he was strong enough to heft it back into the trunk again immediately after his episode. His arms felt a bit like overstretched elastic bands; but with careful use of his legs and a great deal of care, Hikaru returned Sai's former home back to its hidey-hole. It didn't occur to Hikaru until he reached the bottom of the stairs that he actually had another reason for feeling a bit uncomfortable having Sai play his grandfather.

I want to play him first, he acknowledged. *Which normally wouldn't be a problem but I don't even have a goban back at home yet.*

Maybe he hadn't thought this through as thoroughly as he perhaps *should* have. He had been in such a rush to confirm that this wasn't

all some vivid dreamscape that he hadn't actually thought about *what comes next*.

No computer meant no netGo. No Goban meant no games in his room. His age of twelve meant that finding time and spending-money to visit Go salons would be just as difficult and prohibitive as it had the first time. *Probably no more than once a week if THAT*, Hikaru realized with a blanch. And *Insei*? Hikaru had mixed feelings on trying to convince either his grandfather or his parents to sponsor him financially to become an Insei. While it would mean meeting up with Waya and Isumi and company again, nothing would be the same. The reason why they had all become so close was because they all experienced various situations together as they grew. Shared suffering became the bonds of affection. Sai, and even Hikaru were leagues past the level of any Insei and putting himself into that situation meant that jealousy and resentment would be a real and present danger to friendships not yet formed. To Hikaru, joining the Insei felt almost like he would be trampling upon the spirit of what it meant to *be* an Insei.

Clearly, Hikaru still had much to think about.

"Hikaru? Are you all right?" Sai asked. "It feels like you're thinking deep thoughts."

"I'm fine, I'll tell you later." He pushed his concerns aside for the moment, happy to be distracted by Sai. "For now, let's go find my grandfather. He'll be happy to play us." Hikaru turned and threaded the cheap lock back into its place barring the door with a final *click*.

The joyful bubbling of emotions in the back of his head sent shivers of bliss straight down his spine to every tingly nerve ending in his hands and feet and *especially* behind his eyes.

Shindo Hikaru, he thought whimsically as he navigated the path of the rock-garden and stood before the raised porch of his grandparent's house, *sixteen going on twelve. Or, should that be: Shindo Hikaru and wayward spirit, sixteen going on twelve-hundred.*

He smiled as the sounds of his grandfather complaining about something from the confines of the powder room trickled out of doors. He took a short breath, toed his shoes off and took a step forwards and upwards, towards the future. His best friend humming joyfully somewhere in the back of his mind.